

University of Alberta Library



0 1620 2455 5599

DOGMATIC
THEOLOGY

ALEXANDER KOSHETZ in Ukrainian Music

by

Prof. G. W. Simpson

1946

CULTURE and EDUCATION

Winnipeg, Canada



EX LIBRIS
UNIVERSITATIS
ALBERTENSIS

Prairie Provinces Collection

1160
DOGMATIC
THEOLOGY

ALEXANDER KOSHETZ

in Ukrainian Music

By

Prof. G. W. Simpson,
of the University of Saskatchewan



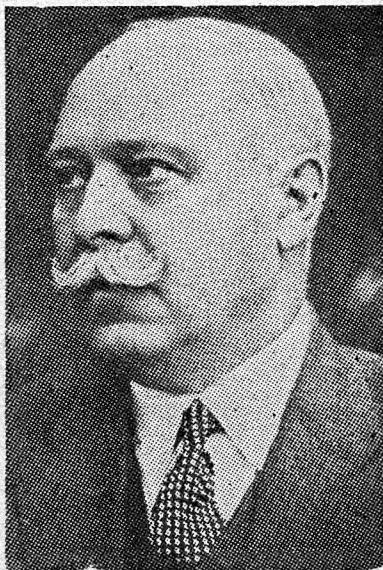
1946

CULTURE and EDUCATION

Published by the
Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Centre
P.O. Box 3113 Winnipeg, Man. Canada

UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

On the occasion of the Memorial Concert held
under the auspices of the Alpha Omega Society,
in the University of Saskatchewan, March 9,
1945



Alexander Koshetz

SOME four years ago, in the late summer of 1941, I journeyed to Winnipeg to attend a gala Ukrainian Concert to mark the end of a Summer School of the Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Centre, the special feature of which was the training of Choral conductors. The downtown theatre in which the Concert was held was packed from top to bottom. As the hour approached there was a buzz and hum of conversation, a glow of eager expectation shone in many faces, and there was throughout the house that atmosphere of animated tenseness which all musicians know and love—or fear. Finally the curtain slowly rolled up and there stood a large mixed choir dressed in the happy cheerful colors of the Ukrainian native costumes. The confused chatter of the audience quietly scampered off into silence. The house lights were dimmed and the focus of tenseness was centred on the platform. All eyes were turned to the wings of the stage. Then, after the exactly appropriate moment of waiting, a figure moved briskly to a conductor's stand at the centre front. The audi-

ence burst into a storm of applause and I saw for the first time the famous Ukrainian composer and director, Dr. Alexander Antonovich Koshetz.

As he stood there acknowledging the applause, with a slight dignified bow, I saw that he was a man in his sixties, of fairly large stature, already showing the contours of middle age. He had a large, shining head, rubicund face, and elegantly waxed, somewhat up-curved, moustaches. He easily dominated the stage. With a quick movement he turned to face the choir, and with the raising of his hand a great silence succeeded the applause. The hand now moved with great precision and the concert had begun. The musical effect was almost like an organ; the director was the organist. With the sweep of one hand the swelling music rose to a grand crescendo, then with the slow closing of the fingers it faded into a soft diminuendo. I had never fully realized before the possibilities of choral music or those particular qualities of Ukrainian national music.

It was on this occasion that I became ac-

quainted with Dr. Koshetz and our acquaintance rapidly became a friendship. On the stage Dr. Koshetz was the artist and craftsman, meticulous over every detail, impatient and almost furious over careless and slovenly execution, but off stage he was the most genial of hosts and the most warm-hearted of friends. I can hear him now in the midst of a small circle, singing folk songs far into the night, his face aglow with pleasure as he led—verse after verse some half-forgotten air; or I can see him discussing in animated, but serious fashion, some grave problem of current political or cultural importance. For years he had been working on the history of Ukrainian music and he sent me a short outline of his study. Unfortunately I am not trained in music and I cannot appreciate the technical aspects of this history. However, its general background is clear and I am using it as a source of information for the outline of Ukrainian musical history which will indicate the place which Dr. Koshetz himself occupies in the last chapters of that long story.

Music is a language understood by all man-

kind. Indeed, it is one of those universal aspects of culture which furnishes hope for international understanding and appreciation. But while the language is universal, the special idioms, phrases, moods, and emphasis are supplied by particular national groups according to their experiences, environment and temperament. Thus Ukrainian music is characterized by peculiar vigor and vitality, having its own strenuous tempo, but marked also by overtones of pathos, sadness, and a dash of fatalism suggestive of the history of the Ukrainian people.

About 2000 B.C. there began to arrive on the steppelands north of the Black Sea the vanguards of a great cultural procession of peoples whose distinguishing mark was a common ancestral speech—the Indo-European language. In this procession were the later Greeks, Kelts, Latins, Germans and Slavs. Among the Slavic-speaking peoples were the ancestors of the present-day Ukrainians. In those far-off early times the Indo-European people were composed of simple primitive folks tending their flocks and herds, or settling down here

and there to cultivate the soil, or to supplement their livelihood by fishing and hunting. Their pagan gods were the gods of nature, and the procession of the seasons in the temperate zones provided the moods and crises in the yearly round of their existence.

It is from the background of these ancient primitive times that the structure of folk songs begins to appear. Each season of the year produced songs appropriate to its mood, just as it produced ceremonials, festivals, and rituals, to organize the emotional life of the group, that it might survive and constantly look forward.

KOLIADY

The most critical time of the year in the temperate zone was the beginning of winter. The power of the sun was at its weakest, the nights were long and dark, and the whole of animated nature seemed suspended in death, paralysis and gloom. And so the festival of winter was born to cheer and animate the sinking hearts, to reawaken the power of the sun by the kindling of fires and little lights,

and through the singing of songs in unison to encourage the group to endure and even to rejoice. Thus there emerged a distinctive group of Ukrainian folk songs known as the Koliady. Long afterwards they became the basis of the Christmas carols. Although given a Christian setting, they still retained something of the naturalistic and ritualistic quality of the early primitive times. In the melodic rhythm of these ancient themes, sung in chorus, one hears at times the echo of far-off pagan days, when Svaroh (god of the moon) and Perun (god of the thunder) might thunder across the heavens.

VESNIANKY

With the coming of spring a new mood replaces that of winter gloom. The joyousness of reanimated nature is shared by man. The brightening sun, the soft rain, the swelling water brooks, the tender green of grass and leaves, and the birth of the young, conveys a thrill and tingle of the heart of man as he feels the dangers of winter past, and sees everywhere resurrected life. He bursts into

song. And thus there emerged another distinctive group of Ukrainian songs centred around spring. There are known as the Vesnianky. They are full of joyous allusion to objects of nature: the falcon, eagle, the nightingale and other creatures of the air; the rabbit, the kid, the drake; the blossoming cherries, pear-tree, violets, willow, cranberry bush; the spring water and mist. These songs were frequently sung by girls. While christianization adopted the spring celebrations to mark the solemn splendour of the drama of Christ's resurrection, many of the spring songs remained intact with their original symbolism and imagery.

The spring song became a distinctive kind of poetical-musical creation which even modern writers have used as a model. I would like here to quote a little spring song called Vesnianka written by a famous Ukrainian in the early part of the Nineteenth century, Markian Shashkevich. Incidentally, some months ago a statue to this writer on one of the squares in Winnipeg was unveiled by Canadian admirers of his genius.

The translation of this poem was made by Honore Ewach, a graduate of the University of Saskatchewan, and is contained in his book of translations—"Ukrainian Songs and Lyrics". I am proud to say that the booklet is "Dedicated to My Alma Mater, University of Saskatchewan". Here is the poem in its English version:

A tiny, slender
Primrose was saying,
Her mother praying,
"Lovely and tender
Mother of flowers
And springtide showers,
Each night and daily
Let me bloom gaily,

Make me look queenly,
Let sunbeams dress me,
Let star-rays kiss me,
Let love serenely,
Fondly embrace me."

"My pretty darling,
In love embrace me,
Hear how still snarling
Cold winds are tripping,
Frosts are still nipping;
Beware, I pray you:

Wilful and teasing,
With lips all freezing,
With cold caresses,
Fondling your tresses,
They may betray you."

KUPALO SONGS

Another distinctive group were the Kupalo songs. These were associated with early summer and seem in origin to have been connected with very ancient wedding customs. Kupalo means bathing. Perhaps the termination of the wedding ceremony was a symbolical purification with water and fire. In their survival these Kupalo songs become connected with such customs as young couples jumping through fire, casting wreaths in the water and fortune telling. The Christian Church had some difficulty in bringing this ceremonial of early summer within the Christian Calendar. It finally succeeded in having the ceremonial associated with St. John the Baptist. But the holiday was known as Ivan Kupa, or Ivan Kupalo.

OTHER SONGS

There were other groups such as the harvest songs, or wedding songs, some connected with the autumn. Indeed, there is every evidence to indicate that already in the very earliest time the Slavic ancestors of the Ukrainians possessed a great wealth of ritual songs. Some were sung in unison; some in part or polyphony; some were in the form of games or pantomime. These songs furnished a musical pattern for their lives throughout the year, a pattern which up to modern times had not wholly vanished. The melodies were relatively single—some with only a range of five notes. As the songs developed, the range increased.

In any case, the basis of Ukrainian folk songs lies deep like a geological strata which establishes the broad contours of a landscape.

CHURCH MUSIC

The event of greatest single significance in the cultural history of the Ukrainians was the acceptance of Christianity. The traditional date is 988. While Christian influences had

reached Kiev before this, the formal acceptance by Volodimir the Great marks the beginning of a new era. At this time the Christian Church had not yet been finally split into its Great Orthodox and Roman Catholic branches, but the Christian centre having most direct influence was the great Greek metropolis and capital of the Eastern Empire, Constantinople.

Their representatives from the court of Kiev were impressed by the magnificent splendor of Santa Sophia, the gorgeous vestments of the clergy, the elaborate ceremonies and the incense pervaded atmosphere. As the old chroniclers related, those attending the religious service knew not whether they were in heaven or on earth.

The introduction of Christianity brought to the Ukraine religious music already considerably developed. But the clergy and singers were Greek Bulgarians. Prince Volodimir himself established a school for singers or institute of Demestics. While the church music in its framework continued to conform to the Greek Orthodox canon it was not long before its melodies began to develop from the genius

of the people native to the soil of the Ukraine. The centres of development were monasteries, especially the monastery of Kiev, the Pecherska Lavra. Here choral liturgical singing was developed from its simplest form. To begin with the main melody was indicated by mnemonic signs for the guidance of a single voice. Other singers joined in contributing polyphonic parts. Later arrangements were made for two, three or more voices. Thus in the course of time there began to develop a distinctive type of church music. These recorded melodies were known as Znamenny Tunes to distinguish them from traditional tunes which were sung directly from memory and learned by ear. These native forms of church music had already become established and beloved of the people when the greatest of all calamities befell the nation. This was the invasion of the great Tatar hordes from Asia about 1240. Their onslaught had a devastating effect on the cultural centres of the Dnieper and Upper Volga, centres which up to that period compared favorably with centres elsewhere throughout Europe. Under the impact and do-

mination of the Tatars culture withdrew westward or found a precarious refuge in the monasteries of the devastated lands. While the Eastern Slavic peoples groaned in subjection to the Tatar hordes, the southern Slavic peoples began to fall under the shadow of the Turkish Crescent moving northward over the Balkan peninsula. In 1453 the old battered walls of Constantinople, which had defended Christendom in the south east for a thousand years, yielded to the scimitars of the Turkish hosts, and the heaven-domed Cathedral of Santa Sophia became a Mohammedan mosque. Only through the West did the newer developments in European culture reach the isolated Eastern slavs.

COSSACK SONGS

This dark and desolate age was followed by the most gloriously dynamic period in the history of the Ukrainian people, the Cossack period. It begins about the time Columbus discovered America (1492) and ends about the time the American colonies were revolting

against Great Britain (1775), reaching its highest pitch of intensity about 1648.

To appreciate the Cossack movement one must remember that it represents various historical movements in combination. To begin with, it represented the turn of the tide against Tartars and Turks. From the forests, swamps, and sheltered places in the West the Christian Slavs began to take the offensive against the barbaric hordes that had so long occupied and desolated their lands. As they organized themselves into hard fighting, mobile groups, guarding the river valleys and rolling plains against traditional enemies, a fierce pride in their fighting skill developed and an exuberant confidence in final victory.

Secondly, the Cossack movement represents a great frontier agricultural development where behind the swords of warriors advanced a mass of farmers with plough, sickle and scythe, bent on possessing the good earth and making it fruitful.

Thirdly, on the basis of greater security and expanding agriculture towns and cities began to flourish again, and above all, Kiev

became once more a centre of culture and learning.

Fourthly, it represents a great social movement. To escape developing forms of serfdom, chiefly in Poland, masses of Ukrainians fled to the free, reconquered steppe lands. Here they were joined by other refugees and adventurers. Like the call of our prairies at the beginning of this century the black earth of the broad Dnieper valley acted as a magnet to the bold, the adventurous, and the oppressed. Just as British culture prevailed on the prairies, uniting eventually all groups, so Ukrainian culture dominated all others in that area. Under conditions of the frontier the most democratic forms of life emerged. Not only the forms but the spirit of democracy pervaded the region.

Finally, it became a national movement when desperate attempts were made to establish a larger measure of self-government and eventually independence. The national movement failed. Caught between the old power of Poland and the rising power of Moscovy, with the incalculable movements of Turks and Tar-

tars in the Ukraine became divided between Poland and Moscovite Czars, and after several convulsive struggles lost its self-government and free ways of life. In 1775 the last remnant of the Cossack organization, the Sitch, was destroyed by Catherine the Great, shortly after the time Poland itself was being subjected to partition by the same monarch.

It is not surprising that the spirit of this age should have found expression, in all its aspects, in the songs of the people. The period is rich, beyond compare, in folk songs, reflecting the moods and spirit of the people. The songs include individual laments, heroic tales, songs of battle, stories of imprisonment, narratives of love, hate and revenge, exhortations of freedom and appeals to liberty. Throughout them all is reflected—the natural beauties of the Ukraine, the joy of living, alongside the tragedy of life unfilled.

This week-end we celebrate both the birth and the death of the greatest of Ukrainian Poets, Taras Shevchenko who was born on the 9th of March, 1814, and died on the 10th of March, 1861. In his collection of poems,

called the Kobzar, he has written immortal verse, many of the poems dealing with the tales of the Cossack times.

The Kobzar was a traditional figure, usually a blinded Cossack, who wandered throughout the Ukraine, singing the folk-songs, accompanying himself on a multiple-stringed instrument, called the Kobza. I should like at this point to quote a few lines from Shevchenko's poem "The Night of Taras" which suggests the songs of the Cossack period. The translation is by Dr. A. J. Hunter, a British Canadian, who was a great admirer of Shevchenko, and a warm friend of many Ukrainian Canadians.

"By the road the Kobzar sat
And on his kobza played,
Around him youths and maidens
Like poppy flowers arrayed,
So the Kobzar played and sang
Of many an old, old story,
Of wars with Russians, Pole and Tartar,
And the ancient Cossack glory
He sang of the wars of Taras brave,
Of battles fought in the morning early,

Of the fallen Cossack's grass-grown grave,
Till smiles and tears did mingle fairly.

* * *

These glories of old Cossack lore
Shall be forgotten nevermore."

The term "dumy" is applied to these singing tales of Cossack times. The term is suggestive, since it is associated with the verb "dumaty", meaning "to think".

The course of the Eighteenth century saw the final crushing of Ukrainian freedom and self-government and the subordination of the area to the Czarist government of St. Petersburg. Singers, artists and composers of outstanding talent tended to seek royal favor and patronage in the court and aristocratic circles of Moscow and the capital city. In this period of political decline two other groups of songs became popular.

THE CHUMAK AND HAYDAMAKI SONGS

The Chumak songs are connected with those picturesque caravan traders, who used to sell their wares throughout the Ukraine, mostly salt and fish from the Crimea. As

colorful as gypsies, they had their own distinctive customs and habits, and had also their own jolly picturesque songs, which became the general heritage of the Ukraine.

The haydamaki songs are associated with the despairing efforts of the peasants in the eighteenth century to resist the crushing attempts of the landlords and government to suppress them into a life of hopeless peasantry. These songs are in the nature of heroic epics centering around Robin Hood types of leaders.

At a time when the mass of the Ukrainian people sank into serfdom and political servitude the folk songs became for them not only the living history of their ancestors and one of the greatest sources of common cultural expression, but it was one of the most subtle ties binding together the whole group. Through common song the group found common ground. In the intervals of their hard life they sang their past—and their past, like a loving old grandmother, soothed, comforted, encouraged, enlivened and uplifted them.

OPERA MUSIC

While the common people participated in, and kept alive their common heritage of music, there was a steady development of musical forms associated with the wider musical currents of Europe. Thus, for example, in the eighteenth century there was a development of the operatic musical drama. It followed fairly the Italian tradition. In the nineteenth century it became extremely popular. At a time when Kiev had the same population as Toronto, that capital city of the Ukraine supported three opera houses. Three years ago the Ukrainians throughout Canada celebrated the centennial of the birth of Lysenko (1842-1912), who was one of the most successful of composers of Ukrainian opera. One of his younger associates, as we shall see, was Dr. Koshetz.

DEVELOPMENT UNDER RUSSIA

Church music was steadily developed into various glorious elaborations. Ukrainian singers were everywhere in great demand as

church singers. Choral work was also continually expanded.

Owing to the preponderance of Great Russian influence there was little encouragement for Ukrainian music, as such, on the grand scale. The Great Russian School of Music, which blossomed forth in such magnificence in the nineteenth century, tended to absorb Ukrainian genius just as Russian literature did. Thus Chaykovsky in music, like Gogol in literature, became associated with Great Russian culture. Without freedom the cultural life of the country tended to be blanketed and retarded.

However in spite of difficult political and social conditions genius and talent did emerge. The greatest genius of all appeared at a time when the political fortune of the people was at its lowest ebb. I refer to the artist poet Taras Shevchenko. Like Robert Burns, Taras Shevchenko poured forth his feelings in matchless verse. Drawing on the rich traditions of the past, and the eternal values of human personality, he recreated in verse the spirit of the Ukrainian people. As with Burns,

it is not surprising that many of these poignant verses have been set to music. The following lyric "Vechir" reminds one of Burns' "Cotter's Saturday Night". I venture to give you my own translation.

EVENTIDE

Around the house the cherries bloom;
Above the blossoms, beetles hum.
The ploughmen trudge their long way home,
And maidens singing trip along.
The mother sets the supper table;
The happy family gathers round.
The evening star comes out above them.
A daughter hands the food around;
The mother watches, all attention.
Then the nightingale bursts out in cheer.
The little ones are softly cradled
By mother, who sleeps lightly near.
The whole world slumbers silently,
Save nightingales and maidens free.

**PLACE OF ALEXANDER KOSHETZ IN
UKRAINIAN MUSIC**

The latter half of the nineteenth century was a period of great cultural activity throughout all Europe. There was a general rise in economic well-being and intense cultivation

of the resources of national traditions. More submerged than other national groups the mass of Ukrainians was somewhat belated in arriving at national consciousness. In music there lay rich material to hand in the great heritage of folk music, and in the splendors of church music. Gradually composers began to appear conscious of this great field.

Among these modern leaders was the man whose memory we honor tonight, Alexander Antonovich Koshetz. He was born in Kiev Province, in a village not far from the birth-place of Shevchenko. The date was 1875. He interested himself in church music and folk songs, and finally music became the great passion of his life. He composed music for church choirs. He began to gather folk songs which hitherto had not been written down, but simply transmitted orally from generation to generation. For many of these he arranged various settings. In 1906 he became associated with M. Lysenko, perhaps the greatest of contemporary composers, and continued to work with him for six years. In 1915 Koshetz became the teacher of choral music in the Kiev

conservatory and director of the Kiev City Opera.

When the Russian revolution of 1917 occurred and the Ukraine established self-government and later independence, Koshetz became Director of the Musical Division in the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. He threw himself with enthusiasm into his work. At last, so he believed, the Ukraine might show to the world its precious musical gifts and attainments.

The political collapse of the Ukraine in 1919 brought to an end his wide, generous plans for musical development in his native land. As defeat drew near he decided to organize a Ukrainian choir, which he might take abroad to demonstrate the reality of the Ukrainian nation and the beauty and vitality of its musical culture. This was a great act of faith in the midst of tragedy.

This choir gave its first memorable performance in Stanislaviv, where in the midst of tears and cheers it began its notable career. During three years (1919-1922) Dr. Koshetz travelled with his Ukrainian Republican

Choir to all the great musical centres of the world—Europe, South America and North America. Everywhere the performance was greeted with wonder and admiration. To many it was a revelation of beauty.

When the choir was finally disbanded, Koshetz settled down near New York and set himself the task of introducing to American lovers of music the Ukrainian folk songs and choral music. It was a long and somewhat lonely task. His insistence on accuracy and the highest level of performance frequently made his burden almost greater than he could sustain. Frequently he had an almost overwhelming nostalgia for the Ukraine, a homesickness which only an exile from his native land can appreciate. Hence it was with great delight that he received an offer to be an Art Supervisor at the Summer School in Winnipeg in 1941.

He related to me how much he appreciated the enthusiastic welcome extended to him in Canada. Never since he had left the Ukraine had he been surrounded with such warm and appreciative friends. For four summers he

put all his remaining strength into his teaching. It was as if he feared he might be removed from the stage of life by that most peremptory of all conductors, Death, before he had played his full piece. His full piece was to train, with Dr. P. Macenko, a sufficient number of Ukrainian Canadian musicians in the finest tradition of Ukrainian music so that those traditions might contribute their golden thread to the future pattern of Canadian music. I think he accomplished his hope. Here in Western Canada are dozens of conductors who have benefitted from his training and the spirit of his art. If these conductors are true to that spirit, they will pass on to Canada one of the finest musical traditions of the world.

On September 21, 1944, Koshetz passed away in Winnipeg. It was his wish that his body might be buried in the Canadian city which had been so friendly to him, until sometime in the future it would be possible to transfer his bones to his beloved native land, the Ukraine, to be interred in the golden-domed city of Kiev. A throng of nearly ten

thousand people attended his funeral. People came from far and near to do him honor. A choir sang in haunting melody the last sad but triumphant notes. Among the mourners was the widow, Tetyana Koshetz, who had shared his musical enthusiasm and, being a musician in her own right, had given him inspiration as well as devoted wifely service.

Perhaps I cannot end more fittingly than to quote Shevchenko's Hymn of Exile as translated by Dr. E. J. Hunter:

The sun goes down beyond the hill,
The shadows darken, birds are still;
From fields no more come toilers' voices,
In blissful rest the world rejoices.
With lifted heart I, gazing, stand,
Seek shady grove in Ukraine's land.
Uplifted thus, 'mid memories fond,
My heart finds rest, o'er the hills beyond.
On fields and woods the darkness falls,
From heaven blue a bright star calls,
The tears fall down. Oh, evening star!
Has thou appeared in Ukraine far?
In that fair land do sweet eyes seek thee,
Dear eyes that once were want to greet me?
Oh, then in slumber let them sleep,
No longer o'er my fate to weep.



Printed by
Ukrainian National Publishing Co. Ltd.
Winnipeg, Manitoba.



Printed in Canada